

Sportsmanship In The Eye Of The Beholder

By **BERNIE PUCHALSKI , STANDARD STAFF**

If you believe the words of the governing bodies of high school sports, sportsmanship is at the top of the list when discussing the purpose of high school sport.

The aims and objectives according to OFSAA are: firstly "to provide leadership on behalf of its membership organizations in support of the educational value of team sport"; and, third on the list is "to promote fair play and equal opportunities for success in all high school competition."

There are several public service announcement on OFSAA's web page promoting sportsmanship and prominently displayed is the slogan:

Sportsmanship, it's up to you."

The website for the Southern Ontario Secondary Schools Athletic Association has the slogan: "Shaping tomorrow's leaders through athletics."

On SOSSA's home page, it's mandate is stated as "to manage interscholastic athletics in a manner that promotes fair play, equal opportunity and sound educational values."

The constitution of the Niagara Region High School Athletic Association is equally clear.

"The purpose of this manual is to assist in the development of high standards of sportsmanship and physical achievement in our athletes through interschool athletic competition conducted on a sound organizational and ethical basis."

I believe that the statements of all three organizations are noble and should be adhered to, but are they? In a recent column criticizing the NRHSAA for its formation of the AAA/AAAA football league and the competitive imbalance that ensued, I was taken to task by several educators about my concern about the high number of embarrassing blowouts in the league.

In a widely-circulated e-mail response to my column, Rina Rode, the athletic convenor for the District School Board of Niagara and the Niagara Catholic District School Board, had this to say about blowouts.

"To think that football is the only sport that is suffering from huge disparate scores would be ignorant. There are basketball games where teams are losing by a score of over 50 to 0! My own school lost a game to a fellow NRHSAA school by a score of 65-3. There are girls hockey games with scores of 18-0 and 22-2. There are volleyball games which last less than 20 minutes for a best-of-five set to be completed. There are soccer games resulting in a score of 7- or 8-0. There are cross-country runners running five kilometres in 18 minutes and others in the race running the same distance in over 40 minutes."

A local basketball coach send me the following response:

"Why are you so concerned about blowouts in football when they occur everywhere in school sports? There is a massive disparity amongst the calibre of teams within their own school designations in most sports.

Why no complaints about how their leagues are organized? There was also blowouts in your seemingly-cherished Varsity (football) League yet that was completely acceptable.

"Should everyone in any sport who is losing simply move down? Do you want to create fun leagues or intramural leagues? Your arguments fly in the face of equity and striving for excellence. You suggest that somehow if schools are struggling that we all lower the bar for them. If you are strong in football, you are criticized for running up scores?"

And from another high school coach.

"I think your article was way off base and a little narrow-minded.

Football is only one sport that we offer in our schools, and I believe there are disparities in all of our sports, take your pick. I have experienced both sides of it."

Before I state my opinion on the above comments, I'll begin with one of the many e-mails, phonecalls and comments I received in support of my column. It comes from the parent of an A.N. Myer football player. The former Varsity 1 football team has been out-scored 255-0 in its five games played against former Premier League teams.

"As a parent of a Myer football player, I can tell you that my son has lost interest in returning to football next year because of the lopsided league," he wrote.

In my eyes, losing even one participant is significant.

As for blowouts in high school sports, I abhor them in every sport and would write about them if I saw them on a regular basis. What lessons are we teaching student athletes to win a football game 72-0, a basketball 65-3 or a hockey game 22-2? I know society has gone a little too far with helicopter parents fighting their kids every battle and sheltering them from the cruel, cruel world, but there's a huge difference between getting beat and taxpayer-funded public humiliation.

If I'm the coach of a high school hockey team ahead 12-0, I would stop the game, have the players throw all their sticks in at centre ice and then randomly pick two teams to conclude the time slot and have fun. The winning team still gets the win and the two teams leave the ice more as friends than adversaries.

Same thing with basketball. Ahead 50-0, I concede the victory or defeat, pull out singlets, and again divide the teams for a fun scrimmage.

I know my suggestions for basketball and hockey would not be adopted in a million years, but maybe there should be a mercy rule or the clock starts to run in straight time when you get ahead by a certain margin.

Football is probably the hardest to control in terms of blowouts, but I would start by having equitable and fair leagues that each team at least has a chance of not getting blown out by half time. If it means letting teams play down a level to maintain the health of their programs, then so be it. When a team is trailing by 35 points, even if it's only halfway through the second quarter, the game goes into straight time with no stoppages for whistles, only injuries. If the team gets back within the 35-point margin, the game goes back into regular timing.

Many people took my column as a slam against coaches who produce dominant programs that blow out opponents, but that wasn't its intent. I commend these coaches for the untold hours they put in and the lives they shape in the process. But there's something wrong with the system, if they can't see blowouts through the eyes of other teams.

I conclude with another one of Rode's comments.

"In your article, you asked of football, Why fix something that wasn't broken? Believe me when I say that football was very broken..... And I feel quite confident that the individuals who make up the NRHSAA will do everything in their power to ensure that football, and indeed all sports, are dealt with in ways that ultimately lead to improvement and fairness."

If administrators and respected coaches believe blowouts should be an accepted and commonplace part of high school sports, then I believe the NRHSAA is very broken. Maybe it's time to hold a summit that includes more than just teachers - such as parents, students, the media and outside coaches - and decide what exactly students/athletes should be taking out of high school sports. If the consensus is that severe beat-downs are beneficial in developing the leaders of tomorrow, I fear for the future.